

"Essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors": Thomas Hardy and the Community of Letter Writers

Koehler, Karin

Victorian Review

Published: 01/03/2015

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Koehler, K. (2015). "Essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors": Thomas Hardy and the Community of Letter Writers. *Victorian Review*, 41(1), 125-142.

Hawliau Cyffredinol / General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

‘Essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors’: Thomas Hardy and the Community of Letter Writers

Karin Koehler

In early nineteenth-century Britain, letters were paid for by the recipient, and they were so expensive that most of the country's population could not afford them. The process of epistolary transmission and delivery was complicated and time-consuming, making the entire postal service slow and inefficient (see Dauntton 7–8). For Rowland Hill, a schoolmaster with a strongly utilitarian ethos and reformist spirit, this state of affairs was untenable in an increasingly fast-paced and mobile world. In 1837, he published the pamphlet *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability*, arguing that the current postal arrangements prevented Britain from flourishing, and that the nation would benefit if postal charges were reduced drastically, to no more than a single penny for any letter weighing under an ounce. In glowing terms, he wrote that the object of universal penny postage

is not to increase the political power of this or that party, but to benefit all sects in politics and religion; and all classes from the highest to the lowest. To the rich, as to the less wealthy, it will be acceptable, from the increased facilities it will afford for their correspondence. To the middle classes it will bring relief from oppressive and irritating demands which they pay grudgingly. ... And to the poor it will afford the means of communication with their distant friends and relatives, from which they are at present debarred. ... A more popular measure could not be discovered. It would bring immediate, substantial, practical, indisputable relief to all. (Hill 66–8)

On 10 January 1840, Britain witnessed the introduction of the penny post, a reform that significantly widened access to communication by letter, and that played an integral role in the gradual yet pervasive shift from oral tradition to written culture that reshaped the nation

over the course of the nineteenth century. As Catherine J. Golden explains, with Hill's reforms "the post became an inclusive network and public service, not just a privilege for the wealthy and noteworthy" (Golden 4).¹ On 2 June 1840, then, Thomas Hardy was born into a world where letter writing had ceased to be a privilege of the few—a world shaped by a reliable, accessible, and affordable postal service, which treated the letters of every single individual, even MPs and the young queen herself, in the same manner (see Cleere 182).

In the preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Hardy states that his fiction depicts "a modern Wessex of ... the penny post." In this "partly real, partly dream country," characters from all ranks, of all ages, and all levels of education frequently and confidently write, send, receive, and read letters (Orel 9). Hardy's first novel, the sensational *Desperate Remedies* (1871), features so many letters (as well as notes and telegrams) that Joe Fisher suggests its plot effectively travels by post (Fisher 35). In Hardy's final novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), the characters' lives (and deaths) are still consistently punctuated by letters. The novel's protagonists, Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead, first enter into contact by means of a written note; another written document, Father Time's suicide note, precipitates the breakdown of their relationship and the novel's tragic conclusion. Commenting on the novel's epigraph, Ariela Freedman remarks that "the words 'the letter killeth' play out in the logic of the narrative, in which events are triggered and culminate through the sending of letters" (Freedman 35). The prevalence of letters in Hardy's novels has been frequently acknowledged and sometimes deplored as a manifestation of incompetent plotting. Crucially though, Hardy's fictional letters—from Bathsheba Everdene's ill-advised valentine in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, to Susan Henchard's poorly sealed letter in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), to the confession letter which famously disappears under a carpet in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891)—are much more than just convenient, arbitrary, or gratuitous plot devices. In fact, they

constitute a privileged space for the exploration of the complex relationship between personal, interpersonal, and collective experience, a site in which to investigate how individuals interact with one another, and with the social and cultural systems of which they are part.

Letters are powerful agents in Hardy's plots. However, these plots are also determined, more specifically, by the ways in which different characters interact with structures, technologies, and media of communication. The plot of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), for instance, is catalysed when the Durbeyfields' family horse, Prince, is killed by a mail cart. As Peter Widdowson notes, this cart serves as a symbol for "the potentially destructive forces of modern change" (Widdowson 121). It is a particularly poignant symbol, I would add, in a novel that documents the pervasive suffering resulting from the failure of communication, communication between sexes, social classes, cultural milieus, and generations. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) is also—and much more explicitly than *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* – a novel about a society "in rapid transition from being an oral culture to being one based on writing" (Miller 37). In telling the story of Michael Henchard, who describes himself as "bad at letters" and "a poor tool with a pen", Hardy consistently makes his plot hinge upon old-fashioned characters' inability to adjust to modern practices of communication (Hardy, *Mayor* 78, 127). Thus, Henchard discovers that Elizabeth-Jane is not his biological daughter because his wife Susan, who has only recently learned to write, has "folded and tucked in" the sheets of the letter containing this revelation "without an envelope in the old-fashioned way" (Hardy, *Mayor* 122). Failing to seal her letter properly, Susan involuntarily causes considerable emotional distress both for her daughter and her husband.

While there are seemingly innumerable references to letters and other written messages in Hardy's fiction, this article will focus closely on three novels: *The Trumpet-Major* (1880), set before the introduction of the penny post; *Under the Greenwood Tree*

(1872) which take place in the decade of post-office reform; and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), the events of which unfold in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These texts have been selected not because they feature the most striking or memorable examples of letters in Hardy's works, but because, taken together, they provide insights into their author's perspective on the shifting relationship between communication and community. With reference to this set of novels, then, I will trace Hardy's response to the way in which postal reforms affected relations between individuals and their local communities, as well as between local communities and an increasingly integrated society. I will show that although Hardy acknowledges the potential benefits of an affordable, highly efficient postal service, especially its effect on educational and economic standards, he nonetheless presents the "unobstructed circulation of letters" as a mixed blessing (Hill 8). He acknowledges that the promise of a new, nationwide community appeared as a threat to more traditional and self-contained forms of community. Moreover, he challenges the post office's rhetoric of inclusivity, by representing characters who use the post to bridge otherwise insurmountable social barriers, only to make the painful discovery that their letters cannot bring them closer to the communities to which they aspire.

In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Raymond Williams suggests that "[c]ommunication is the process of making unique experience into common experience," and he goes further, claiming that it thus becomes "the process of community, the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception, and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change" (55). This sounds self-evident and intuitive; without communication, any given community would become dysfunctional to the point of disintegration. But Williams' words gain significance when we begin to consider that the process of communication itself is not timeless or universal, but subject to evolving cultural, material, and technological conditions. Until the nineteenth century, community was, for the most part,

constructed and consolidated through direct, face-to-face exchanges between people inhabiting the same location. In the course of Queen Victoria's reign, however, it became ever more possible for British subjects to "make unique experience into common experience" across physical distance – even for the "poorer and more numerous classes" (Hill 55), and even for those who populated the most remote, isolated corners of the country (see Thomas 12). Victorian developments in communication technology—the penny post, the railway, and the telegraph—seemed to come hand in hand with new opportunities for fostering a sense of community apart from location, uncompromised by geographical borders and social distinctions.

In considering his portrayal of letters, it is crucial to take into account that Hardy—unlike other Victorian novelists such as Charles Dickens or Anthony Trollope, whose works also abound with written messages—wrote "books of rural life" (Gibson 37). Seeking to portray and preserve the customs and manners of traditional rural communities, these books convey how the penny post and related advances affected, and were perceived by, individuals and groups for whom the very possibility of writing letters, or, indeed, writing anything at all was radically transformative. In contemplating Hardy's use of letters, we can thus enhance our understanding of the ways in which traditional rural communities adjusted to, seized upon, or struggled with, the opportunities afforded by new modes and forms of communication.

The Trumpet-Major

Two novels in which letters and notes appear, at first sight, to occupy a minor role offer an intriguing starting point for an examination of the relationship between communicational advances and communal life in Hardy's fiction. *Under the Greenwood Tree* contains eight letters and notes; in *The Trumpet-Major*, seven letters are exchanged by main characters—negligible numbers compared to the more than seventy written messages in *Jude the Obscure*, or the 178 mentions of the word "letter" in *Desperate*

Remedies. It is important to note, however, that Mellstock and Overcombe, the respective settings of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Trumpet-Major*, exemplify the vital function of oral tradition in the lives of rural communities. Accordingly, letters and the post play a different role in these two novels than in later texts, or texts with more explicitly modern settings, where written culture seems to have displaced oral tradition as the organising principle of social life. Nonetheless, these texts subtly register the acute anxieties, as well as the occasional enthusiasm, with which communicational developments were greeted by the members of traditional communities.

The Trumpet-Major is set during the Napoleonic Wars, when postal charges, like all other taxes, were consistently raised with a view to financing Britain's military efforts (see Milne 42). "There was a letter in the candle three days ago this very night—a large red one; but foolish-like I thought nothing o't," Miller Loveday exclaims early on in the text, upon learning from the Weymouth Postmaster that "a letter has been lying at the post-office for [him] for the last three days" (Hardy, *Trumpet-Major* 91). His cryptic words refer to the common folk superstition that "a bright spark on the candle-wick indicates a letter coming to the house," and that this letter would be addressed to the person towards whom the spark was shining (Hunt 430). It was further believed that "by striking the bottom of the candle-stick on the table," one could discover the date of the letter's arrival (Hunt 431). As L.M. Eyre explained in a 1901 letter to the Folklore Society, "[w]hen there is a letter in the candle, you thump on the table until the spark falls off—so many thumps, so many days before the letter will arrive" (Eyre 170–171).² Miller Loveday, however, has failed to read the many signs in his candle correctly, so that the news about the letter catches him unaware. *The Trumpet-Major* is Hardy's only historical novel, and the allusion to this folklore belief subtly conveys that in the England of the Napoleonic Wars communication by letter was a rare phenomenon, accompanied by a sense of awe and wonder, and capable of exerting considerable influence over the popular imagination.³

Only a few lines later, Hardy makes the same point much more explicitly, emphasizing that “[a] letter at this time was such an event for hamleteers, even of the miller’s respectable standing, that Loveday thenceforward was thrown into a fit of abstraction” (91).

Despite the inbuilt mutuality of correspondence, letter writing is often considered to be a highly individualistic, even solipsistic, activity. Moreover, as Charles Porter puts it, “the typical letter remains essentially a private communication between two persons” (Porter 2). Both notions suggest that somehow epistolary communication must be in conflict with communal relationships, or that letter writing and reading are, in fact, the activities of “privatized individuals” (Habermas 48). In *The Trumpet-Major*, Hardy reveals the historically and culturally contingent bias of this assumption. Early in the novel, he writes that in Overcombe,

Mrs. Martha Garland, as a respectable widow, occupied a twilight rank between the benighted villagers and the well-informed gentry, and kindly made herself useful to the former as letter-writer and reader, and general translator from the printed tongue. (42)

That many of the illiterate villagers seek Mrs. Garland’s assistance with their correspondence suggests that, for them, privacy is not a paramount consideration. Even when letters concern personal matters, they willingly share them with trusted members of the village community—much like the illiterate village girls for whom Hardy had acted as an “amanuensis” or “writing-machine” during his childhood in Bockhampton (Gibson 67).

More surprisingly perhaps, the same attitude extends to the more privileged and better-educated members of the community. In the case of the letter awaiting Miller Loveday at the Weymouth Post Office, the addressee is neither the only nor the first reader. “Father told me to read it at once, in case of bad news,” the miller’s son John tells Anne Garland, the novel’s heroine, after having finally obtained the coveted document (97). Rather like the “one solitary newspaper,” which “occasionally [finds] its way into

village,” and which is passed around from household to household, the personal letter functions as a shared source of information. In fact, the narrator notes that, generally, “[a] letter was a matter of public moment, and everybody in the parish had an interest in the reading of those rare documents” (44, 98).

This notion of the letter as a “matter of public moment” and of communal significance culminates when Hardy’s narrator memorably and affectionately describes Miller Loveday’s own reading of the letter:

when the miller had placed the candle, slanted himself, and called in Mrs. Garland to have her opinion on the meaning of any hieroglyphics that he might encounter in his course, he found that he was to be additionally assisted by the opinions of the other neighbours, whose persons appeared in the doorway, partly covering each other like a hand of cards, yet each showing a large enough piece of himself for identification. (98)

Even before Bob’s letter has reached Overcombe, it inspires communal gossip: “We heard you had got a letter, Maister Loveday,” the neighbours explain as they flock into the mill (98). And Loveday unhesitatingly reads the letter aloud, knowing that they are present not just out of curiosity but also solidarity. Due to the prohibitive expense they incurred, letters were generally reserved for special occasions and urgent matters. For anybody who was separated from friends or kin, the arrival of a letter was inevitably accompanied by the dread of bad, or even the worst, news. In this case, however, as one local observes: “’tis good news for ye, miller.” The letter concerns the engagement of the miller’s elder son, Bob Loveday, and its contents provoke further commentary and discussion among the present community: “‘Tis a proper good letter,’ said Mrs. Comfort from the background. ‘I never heerd true love better put out of hand in my life’” (98–99).

For H.A.T. Johnson, Overcombe Mill serves as an embodiment of communal spirit, as “its inhabitants, by their generosity and general unselfishness, make it a natural centre

for gaiety and high spirits in the neighbourhood” (57). The reading of Bob Loveday’s letter, I propose, constitutes one of the most poignant illustrations of this communal spirit, signaling the way in which personal experience is subsumed by and incorporated into the life of the community, which in turn provides an essential network of support and security for each of its members. Yet, the letter simultaneously exposes that Overcombe, and the people who inhabit it, are all but isolated from or indifferent to the world beyond the village borders. By making one of Miller Loveday’s sons a merchant sailor and the other a soldier, Hardy foregrounds how strongly the life of the village is implicated in and affected by events of national and even international scope. The villagers are eager for news from and contact with the outside world, but they continue to share a unified outlook on that world as well as their own, a particular communal way of understanding, which is consolidated by daily face-to-face communication.

Under the Greenwood Tree

Examining the growth of literacy and its influence on popular culture, David Vincent observes that

[t]he introduction of the Penny Post in 1840 was ... designed to transform the relationship between the individual and the nation. The constellation of private neighbourhoods, bounded by their dependence on the spoken word, were to be translated into an integrated society of freely communicating citizens. (Vincent 230)

If *The Trumpet-Major*’s Overcombe is an exemplary “private neighbourhood,” in an earlier novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy portrays a rural community’s response to the emergence of “integrated society.” *Under the Greenwood Tree*, a fictionalized portrait of the parish in which Hardy had been born and raised, takes place after the introduction of penny postage. Early on, when the Mellstock choir fails to elicit a reaction from the new schoolmistress during their Christmas carolling, one of the musicians muses, “surely ‘tisn’t

an empty house, as befell us in the year thirty-nine and forty-three” (Hardy, *UGT* 33).

Thus, it is all the more striking that the postal service remains conspicuously absent from this text. In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, all written messages travel within the boundaries of a single parish, being carried by the correspondents themselves or by private messengers. The differing attitudes toward postal communication in these two novels draw attention to changing social structures, and especially to changes in the self-perception of local communities. Irving Howe describes *Under the Greenwood Tree* as a story about

the life of a community still quite sure of itself, still largely untroubled by intrusions of restlessness, and still able to gain a degree of satisfaction, if not an intense spiritual recovery, from a steady adherence to Christmas rites. (Howe 47)

The key word in this quotation is “still.” *The Trumpet-Major* depicts a community that is stable and confident enough to open itself up to the world beyond the village, remaining unified despite internal and external pressures. The community in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, by contrast, is marked by fragility and self-doubt.

In his essay “The Dorsetshire Labourer” (1883), Hardy remarks upon the fact that increasing mobility among rural labourers and the improved connection between rural regions and urban centers had accelerated the dissolution of traditional communities and resulted in the loss of specifically local traditions. He also notes, however, that “the artistic merit of their old condition is scarcely a reason why they should have continued in it when other communities were marching on so vigorously towards uniformity and mental equality” (Orel 181). The non-fictional account appears to be forward looking and, at least on the surface, neutral. In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, which, as Hardy remarked in an interview, seeks to convey “the point of view of the village people” themselves, the tone becomes distinctly more emotional and ambivalent (Gibson 37). The novel is marked by an underlying tension. It acknowledges that an enhanced flow of information helped to

improve levels of education, thus providing new avenues to social mobility: the novel's heroine Fancy Day, for instance, returns to the village as a "Government Teacher" after attending "the training-school" as a first class "Queen's Scholar" (135). Yet, the inhabitants of Mellstock also seem strikingly resistant to a movement towards "uniformity and mental equality," perceiving the new communication technologies' capacity to connect rural regions and urban centers as a curse rather than a blessing. They seem to be aware that to become fully integrated in the national network—postal, as well as political, economic, and cultural—meant to accept standards imposed by the centre, and that, as Birgit Plietzsch states, "[r]egional particulars are in an increasingly national society of only little importance" (55).

In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, the central emblem for the loss of local particularity is the fate of the village choir, which is replaced by the more fashionable and conventional organ after decades of faithful service (see Ebbatson 199). The choir, according to Harold E. Toliver, operates as the "chief symbol for an old order which, since ancient times, has bound the individual members of the community in a loose and varied unity" (62). It stands representative for a wider community, in which "the uniquely personal experience yields in importance to the shared history of the community" (Mallett 50). William Dewy, the protagonist's grandfather, tells his fellow musicians: "Nobody will feel the loss of our church-work so much as I. [...] That you d'all know. I've been in the quire man and boy ever since I was a chiel of eleven" (74). The words convey how strongly his personal identity is bound up with communal traditions. Such traditions, Dewy suggests, not only give structure and meaning to his existence, they form the basis of his (and the other villagers') understanding of the world. Describing the choir's annual Christmas-Eve caroling, Hardy writes:

They passed forth into the quiet night an ancient and time-worn hymn, embodying a quaint Christianity in words orally transmitted from father to son through several generations

down to the present characters. (32) Uniquely characteristic Mellstock traditions have been preserved, it seems, because the chain of oral transmission from one generation to the next has never been interrupted, because the village has remained sheltered from external influences. But even the most established and conservative members of the village community are aware that this seclusion cannot and will not last. "Times have changed from the times they used to be. [...] People don't care much about us now!" Michael Mail, the choir's second violinist, observes, thus articulating both his fear of obsolescence and the awareness of its inevitability in the face of rapid cultural and social transformations (30).

Arguably, then, letters play a seemingly minor role in *Under the Greenwood Tree* because the Mellstock community, or at least its most established members, actively rejects the easy possibility of long-distance communication. The short and supposedly simple tale powerfully illustrates that, as Patrick Joyce notes, "[t]he capacity to communicate with the wider world also brought the wider world more directly to communities that did not always particularly welcome its presence" (137). Noting that the massive increase in mail after 1840 was likely caused by increased volumes of business mail and middle-class correspondence rather than by a new mass of working-class letter-writers, David Vincent comments:

The traditional perception of community ... stood in the way of a large-scale exploitation of the new opportunities. Oral transmission of information depended upon and in turn helped to define a sense of belonging. A mutual knowledge of people and a place made conversation possible, and the continual exchange of news, opinions and gossip created a shared identity. The occasional letter might cross the boundary of the known world, but the correspondence was likely to be between close relatives on matters of private family interest. The association of communication with locality was now challenged by the introduction of a

flatrate pre-paid charge for letters which, it was hoped, would eliminate the dimension of distance in contact between individuals and thus overcome the barriers which stood in the way of the emergence of a new sense of nationhood. (43)

These remarks help to clarify what is at stake in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. No written message crosses the borders of the “known world” in the novel, and this exposes that many of the villagers are not only contented with their limited horizon, but zealous to preserve the status quo of their community. Mellstock exists in a state of self-imposed isolation, resisting integration into the “national community” for as long as it can.

It is no coincidence that the only letter supposed to travel beyond the borders of Wessex is written by a character who has come to the village as an outsider. Maybold, the new village parson, even walks to Casterbridge with his missive to “post it at the town office, and obviate the loss of one day in its transmission that would have resulted had he left it for the foot-post through the village” (173). Crucially, he is also the man who obliges the church band to “make room for the next generation,” so that his desire to connect with the world outside Mellstock becomes directly linked to his efforts to make Mellstock not only more modern, but also more like the rest of the world. In this character, Hardy conceptually links written communication—and postal communication in particular—with change and modernization. And although Maybold is characterized as a kind, generous, and decent man, many of the older villagers are suspicious of the newcomer from the start, precisely because of his association with the written word. After the parson’s first sermon, one local decrees: “His sermon was well enough, a very excellent sermon enough, only he couldn’t put it into words and speak it. That’s all was the matter wi’ the sermon. He hadn’t been able to get it past his pen” (71).

But Maybold’s “long and careful letter to his friend in Yorkshire,” announcing his engagement to Fancy Day, is never dispatched (173). When the clergyman discovers that

prior to accepting his proposal, the schoolmistress had already made a promise to Dick Dewy, a native of the village, he tears the letter and throws the pieces into the river running through—and out of—the village. This single abortive attempt to connect with the world beyond the village, followed by Fancy's endogamous marriage, suggests that, although the choir has ceded its place, the village community remains—for now—intact. The novel ends on a joyful note, but, as D.H. Lawrence notes in his equally idiosyncratic and perceptive study of Hardy's novels, the joy is not unequivocal. Lawrence writes:

Fancy, the little school-mistress, returns to Dick, renounces imagination, and settles down to a steady, solid, physically satisfactory married life, and all is as it should be. But Fancy will carry in her heart all her life many unopened buds that will die unflowered; and Dick will probably have a bad time of it. (22)

The remark captures the fact that, reassuring though the novel's ending may be, it is at the same time regressive and repressive. Fancy had the possibility of broadening her horizon, of upward as well as outward movement, but she, like the rest of the village community, must remain secluded and stagnant. Ultimately, the village community's inability, or unwillingness, to incorporate that which is new, foreign, or unfamiliar appears in a discomfiting rather than charmingly nostalgic light. Far from being insignificant, the sparse but pointed references to written communication in *Under the Greenwood Tree* underscore Hardy's ambivalent response to the "loss of rural cultures and the sense of community" (Plietzsch 129).

Jude the Obscure

Toliver asserts that "if isolation and exile from the community are main themes of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess*, and *Jude*, the community and its binding ceremonies form the center of the *Greenwood Tree*" (61–2). Similarly, H. A. T. Johnson stresses that, even in times of personal and political upheaval [the novel's heroine] always "has somewhere to

go, even someone to lean on. Life at the mill [...] goes on; she can draw strength from it because she belongs to it” (59). Both quotations suggest that though the secluded communities in these earlier novels might appear backward—and Hardy’s texts never allow us to overlook their limitations—they are marked by a spirit of solidarity, generosity, and tolerance that is rarely found in Hardy’s later novels. As Janet Burstein comments, “[i]solated individuals figure in all of Hardy’s later fiction, and their suffering is often contrasted with the more stable lives of men for whom a coherent community still exists” (499). It is no coincidence, I would argue, that Hardy’s later fiction also features ever more instances of mediated communication, presenting a world shaped and determined by a predominantly written culture, as well as by distinctly modern technologies of communication. Focusing on the use of letters in *Jude the Obscure*, I will explore whether Hardy’s novels allow us to believe in the potential for new, alternative forms of community, which might carry the spirit of solidarity, tolerance, and compassion, into the modern world.

Twenty-two years divide *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Jude the Obscure*, and the two texts have strikingly little in common. Hardy’s final novel is devoid of the “local colour,” the vivid and warm representation of communal life, that had distinguished so many of the novels that preceded it. If “the Wessex of the early novels exists as a community as well as a region,” in *Jude the Obscure* it appears to be no more than a background, and a bleak one at that (Mallett 50). The Wessex landscape—distinguished by brown soil and grey stones rather than green fields and forests—has turned barren as a result of economic transformations, especially the rapidly advancing process of industrialisation, and the same seems true with regard to the Wessex community. However, while the absence of traditional community in the novel has provoked considerable discussion, I will consider this phenomenon in relation to the fact that in *Jude the Obscure* Hardy’s characters exchange letter after letter, and that their messages travel not only

between the villages, towns, and cities of England, but between continents.⁴ How, then, does a novel that obsessively incorporates, quotes, paraphrases, or refers to letters, notes, and telegrams reconceptualise the relationship between communication and community?

Marygreen, the village in which Jude Fawley grows up, is marked not by a sense of community, but by a fiercely competitive struggle for survival. Jude is constantly measured in terms of economic usefulness and constantly found wanting, soon realizing that “his existence [is] an undemanded one” (Hardy, *Jude* 18). His own aunt relentlessly declares:

It would ha' been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, wi' thy mother and father, poor useless boy! But I've got him here to stay with me till I can see what's to be done with un, though I be obliged to let him earn any penny he can.

In the same conversation, Drusilla remarks that the orphaned Jude has “come from Mellstock, down in South Wessex, about a year ago” (13). It is as though Hardy would like to make sure we know that his protagonist has been directly transplanted from a warm and nourishing community into an extraordinarily cold and unsympathetic environment. “How ugly it is here,” Jude murmurs to himself, as he is looking at a field on which “[t]he fresh harrow-lines [lend] a meanly utilitarian air to the expanse, taking away its gradations, and depriving it of all history beyond that of the few recent months.” What Jude fails to understand is that, in fact “to every clod and stone there really attached associations enough and to spare—echoes of songs from ancient harvest-days, of spoken words, and of sturdy deeds.” The field has served as a setting for all varieties of both personal and communal activity, but the narrator highlights that “this neither Jude nor the rooks around him considered. For them it was a lonely place, possessing, in the one view, only the quality of a work-ground, and in the other that of a granary good to feed in” (14). Jude does not know about these “associations,” because there is nobody in the village to tell him. Marygreen has ceased to collect, preserve, and share “stories and memories,” and

somewhere along the lines it has ceased to be a community (Mallett 50). One or two decades after the arrival of railways and penny postage, the process of modernization has evidently taken its toll on the landscape and people alike, eradicating virtually all vestiges of both human and natural history.

Deprived of the sense of belonging that emerges from being part of a living community, Jude yearns “to find something to anchor on, to cling to” (25). He finds an object for his escapist fantasies in the city of Christminster, Hardy’s famous fictional rendering of Oxford. As he is leaving Marygreen, Jude’s beloved schoolmaster Phillotson tells his pupil:

My scheme, or dream, is to be a university graduate, and then to be ordained. By going to live at Christminster, or near it, I shall be at headquarters, so to speak, and if my scheme is practicable at all, I consider that being on the spot will afford me a better chance of carrying it out than I should have elsewhere. (10)

The words have a powerful effect upon the young boy’s thoughts, as they incarnate the promise of an alternative mode of existence—one that seems far more appropriate to Jude’s personality than life at Marygreen. Not long after Phillotson’s departure, Aunt Drusilla asks her nephew, “‘Why didn’t ye get the schoolmaster to take ’ee to Christminster wi’ un, and make a scholar of ’ee,’ ... ‘I’m sure he couldn’t ha’ took a better one,” thus reinforcing his conviction that life in “this beautiful city,” which assumes a quasi-mythological status in the boy’s imagination, “would just suit him” (13, 18, 26).

Basing his notions about the city on reports of people who have never been and will never go there, Jude comes to picture Christminster as “a place that teachers of men spring from and go to,” “a castle, manned by scholarship and religion” (25–26). He mentally constructs the city as “an ideal in contrast of what he knows of Marygreen” (DeMille 702). From Drusilla, meanwhile, he learns that the community of which he dreams is within

walking distance. She laconically declares, “Lord! you ought to know where the city of Christminster is. Near a score of miles from here. It is a place much too good for you ever to have much to do with, poor boy, I’m a-thinking” (18). While the statement testifies to the relative geographical proximity of Christminster, the true emphasis rests on the “great social divide between her home and the university city” (Marroni 166). “We’ve never had anything to do with folk in Christminster, nor folk in Christminster with we,” Drusilla clarifies, thus articulating the view that “[p]oor or’nary” people, people who speak in the local dialect and depend on physical labour for survival, have no place in the city of learning, where “they raise pa’sons [...] like radishes in a bed” and where “noble-minded men” can “earn hundreds by thinking out loud” (18, 24, 25). According to Drusilla, Jude ought to know of Christminster, but his knowledge should include awareness of the fact that the two syllables “poor boy” suffice to disqualify him from ever acquiring a place at the eminent university.

Nonetheless, Jude remains determined to penetrate the “castle, manned by scholarship and religion” and to become part of the idealized academic community (26). Crucially, his efforts to defy his aunt’s fatalistic injunctions take shape in a series of letters. From the quack-physician Vilbert, Jude learns that in order to learn Greek and Latin he “must get a grammar of each tongue,” but these—and reading material in general—are difficult to come by in the remote and impoverished Marygreen (27). Jude therefore reflects that

[h]e might, perhaps, have obtained grammars from Alfredston, but to do that required money, and knowledge of what books to order; and though physically comfortable, he was in such absolute dependence as to be without a farthing of his own.

His social status and his lack of financial capital instantly emerge as the primary impediments to his pursuit of knowledge, but Jude finds a solution to this dilemma when he realizes that he could “write to the schoolmaster, and ask him to be so kind as to get him the

grammars in Christminster.” Lacking even the single penny required to dispatch the letter by post, Jude waits for the day on which Phillotson’s piano, stored in Aunt Drusilla’s fuel-house, is shipped to Christminster. He conjectures that “[h]e might slip a letter inside the case of the instrument, and it would be sure to reach the desired eyes” (29). And indeed, against all odds, the letter arrives at its destination and produces the sought-after effect.

By writing this letter, Jude can apparently rupture his confinement at Marygreen, transcending both the geographical and social barriers that separate him from Christminster. Moreover, the “postmark of Christminster” on Phillotson’s parcel ostensibly gives the lie to his aunt’s words, just like the fact that the grammars that it contains are second-hand copies, “mellowed by the university atmosphere” (30, 29). To Jude, it seems as though he has already come a step closer to the Christminster community. Accordingly, he comes to regard letters as essential tools in the advancement of his “lofty desire” (27). Moreover, increasing financial independence gradually enables him to make use of the postal services and thereby expand the scope of his correspondence. Jude’s first copy of “the New Testament in Greek” is “obtained by post from a second-hand bookseller,” and he acquires a “new one [...] with better type than his old copy, following Griesbach’s text as amended by numerous correctors, and with variorum readings in the margin” by “boldly writing to its London publisher, a thing he had never done before” (43). The Post Office evidently allows Jude to establish a connection with the country’s cultural and intellectual centres, considerably facilitating his course of “education by ‘private study’” (32).

But of course it is essential to take into account that letters permit Jude to approach the “headquarters” of intellectual and cultural life only as a disembodied voice, not as a physical presence (10). Once Jude finally arrives at Christminster, after several years of work as a stone-cutter and a failed marriage, he is dismayed to find that the academic community is anything but welcoming, and that “in passing him [the undergraduates do] not even see him, or hear him, rather [see] through him as through a pane of glass.” He

resorts to his old strategy, hoping that letter writing will bring him closer to “those happy young contemporaries of his with whom he shared a common mental life” (86). However, having dispatched his “letters, briefly stating his difficulties, and asking their opinion on his stranded situation” to five “academic dignitaries,” Jude receives only one single reply (114). Arguably, the four replies that he does not receive speak most eloquently; nevertheless, it is worth quoting the one letter that does arrive in full. It reads:

‘BIBLIOLL-COLLEGE.

‘Sir, - I have read your letter with interest; and, judging from your description of yourself as a working-man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do. Yours faithfully, T. TETUPHENAY

‘To Mr. J. Fawley, Stone-cutter.’ (17)

The letter exasperates Jude, but it confirms what the narrator and numerous other characters had intimated all along: that a working-class man’s quest for a degree is an impossible undertaking (see Neill 113; see Williams and Williams 38). Transmitted through the allegedly democratic and egalitarian national Post Office, it underwrites the durability of the rigidly unequal social structures in which Jude is entrapped, serving as a marker of distance rather than connection, of tension rather than community.

Jude had subscribed to the naïve belief that the intellectual community of Christminster is devoid of the harsh struggle for survival that governs the village of his upbringing. The master’s letter forcefully illustrates, however, that, as St  phanie Bernard remarks, “[c]ulture itself is always the business of the strongest, and cultural capital is always denied to the weakest, whatever his abilities may be” (6; my translation). That the letter is addressed “To Mr. J. Fawley, Stone-cutter” says it all, reducing Jude’s possibilities to

manual rather than intellectual work, while the use of the word “sphere” articulates the notion that the social status into which he was born will forever disqualify him from membership of Christminster’s academic community (see Cooper 397). The very layout of Tetuphenay’s letter separates Jude, the “Stone-cutter,” from the colleges, and its message quite literally puts Jude back in his place.

At the beginning of his stay at Christminster, Jude reflects that

he was outside the gates of everything, colleges included: perhaps some day
he would be inside. Those palaces of light and learning; he might some day
look down on the world through their panes. (86)

In reality, Jude will never see more of the university than the “walls of the colleges” and their shut gates, which emblemize less tangible but equally powerful divisions within culture and society: “Only a wall divided him,” Jude reflects, “Only a wall - but what a wall!” (13, 86). Hardy thus poignantly conveys that, whereas his letters can traverse the walls of the Christminster colleges, Jude himself cannot. From the isolation of Marygreen, Jude had no choice but to write letters in order to come into contact with the imagined Christminster community. The fact that “when he [finds] himself actually on the spot of his enthusiasm,” Jude is still limited to writing letters signals defeat. Jude’s words cannot triumph against the dominant social discourse incarnated in Tetuphenay’s epistle, much less against the material realities at its basis. Sue Bridehead passionately indicts the social structures that prevent Jude from fulfilling his dream of attending university:

You are one of the very men Christminster was intended for when the
colleges were founded; a man with a passion for learning, but no money, or
opportunities, or friends. But you were elbowed off the pavement by the
millionaires’ sons. (151)

Christminster, she suggests, may once have been the community of learning that Jude so desperately wishes it to be, but this is no longer the case.

Conclusion

In the two earlier novels, *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Trumpet-Major*, Hardy suggests that the promise of a nation-wide postal community is experienced as a threat by more traditional and self-contained forms of community. In his last novel, he challenges the idea that this postal community arrived with compensating advantages, undermining the reformer's rhetoric of inclusivity and progress. The plot of *Jude the Obscure* compellingly questions "the cross-class benefits of the penny post," suggesting that they were at best limited, if not entirely empty rhetoric (Menke 40). This does not mean, however, that it endorses the self-imposed isolation of the community described in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. At no point does the text convey the sense that it might be better to return to a world in which a man like Jude would not even dare to dream of an education and of social mobility. Instead, *Jude the Obscure* conveys that while the negative aspects of traditional communal life—strict adherence to custom, constant checks to individual self-fulfillment, and a rigorously codified social hierarchy—have found their way into modern society, the best aspect—a sense of communal solidarity—has been eroded, with no viable alternative in sight.

The nineteenth-century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies distinguished between two forms of social relations: *Gemeinschaft*, or community, and *Gesellschaft*, or society. "In the *Gemeinschaft*," he writes, human beings "remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors, whereas in the *Gesellschaft* they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors" (Tönnies 74). The penny post was nothing if not a uniting factor, but as Hardy subtly conveys, far from being a communitarian project, it was primarily an economically and politically motivated measure, which did much to impose centralised control on remote regions and on the economic market, but little to elide the very real distinctions that marked Victorian Britain (Favret 204). Through the use of letters in *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy suggests that social and political changes on a much larger scale than

Hill's postal reforms were required in order for a more modern and inclusive sense of community to emerge in Britain.

It would be too simple, of course, to conclude that Hardy blames technological change and communicational advances for modern alienation and isolation. In fact, his novels convey that developments in communication technology brought about important social, cultural, educational, and economic advances, as well as new opportunities for individual self-fulfilment. Yet, they also evoke the sense that the process of modernisation precipitated the loss of something precious, a communal spirit for which an ever more interconnected society had not yet devised an adequate alternative.

Works Cited

- Bernard, Stéphanie. "*La science et le savoir obscur dans Jude the Obscure de Thomas Hardy.*" *Miranda* 1 (2000). Web. 7 April 2014.
- Burstein, Janet. "The Journey Beyond Myth in Jude the Obscure." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15.3 (1973): 499–515. Print.
- Campbell-Smith, Duncan. *Masters of the Post: The Authorized History of the Royal Mail*. London: Allen Lane, 2011. Print.
- Cleere, Eileen. *Avuncularism: Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Nineteenth-Century English Culture*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. Print.
- Cooper, Andrew. "Voicing the Language of Literature: Jude's Obscured Labor." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.2 (2000): 391–410. Print.
- Daunt, M. J. *Royal Mail: The Post Office since 1840*. London: Athlone, 1985. Print.
- DeMille, B. "Cruel Illusions: Nietzsche, Conrad, Hardy, and the 'Shadowy Ideal'." *Studies in English literature, 1500-1900* 30.4 (1990): 697–714. Web. 6 June 2014.
- Ebbatson, Roger. "Hardy and the Sociological Imagination." *Thomas Hardy in Context*. Ed. Phillip Mallett. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Print.
- Eyre, L.M. "Folklore Notes from St Briavel's." *Folklore* 13.2 (1901): 170–177. Print.

Favret, Mary. *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters*.

Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.

Fisher, Joe. *The Hidden Hardy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992. Print.

Freedman, Ariela. *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Gibson, James, ed. *Thomas Hardy: Interviews and Recollections*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999. Print.

Golden, Catherine J. *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2009. Print.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger; Frederick Lawrence. London: Polity, 1989. Print.

Hardy, Thomas. *Desperate Remedies*. Ed. Mary Rimmer. London: Penguin, 1998.

---. *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Ed. Suzanne Falck-Yi and Linda M. Shires. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

---. *Jude the Obscure*. Ed. Dennis Taylor. London: Penguin, 1998. Print.

---. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Ed. Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell. Oxford: Clarendon, 1983. Print.

---. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Ed. Keith Wilson. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

---. *The Trumpet-Major*. Ed. LM Shires. London: Penguin, 1997. Print.

---. *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Ed. Simon Gatrell and Phillip Mallett. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

Hill, Rowland. *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability*. London: Charles Knight, 1837. Print.

Hillis Miller, J. "Speech Acts, Decisions, and Community in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*."

Thomas Hardy and Contemporary Literary Studies. Ed. Tim Dolin and Peter Widdowson. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004. Print.

Howe, Irving. *Thomas Hardy*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968. Print.

Hunt, Robert. *Popular Romances of the West of England*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1908. Print.

Johnson, H. A. T. "In Defense of *The Trumpet-Major*." *Budmouth Essays on Thomas Hardy*. Dorchester: The Thomas Hardy Society, 1976. Print.

Joyce, Patrick. *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Print.

Lawrence, D.H. *Study of Hardy and Other Writings*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1985. Print.

Mallett, Phillip. "Jude the Obscure: A Farewell to Wessex." *Thomas Hardy Journal* 11 (1995): 48–59. Print.

Marroni, Francesco. *Victorian Disharmonies : A Reconsideration of Nineteenth-Century English Fiction*. Newark: U Delaware P, 2010. Print.

Menke, Richard. *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*. Stanford: Standford UP, 2008. Print.

Milne, Esther. *Letters, Postcards, Email: Technologies of Presence*. New York; London: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Neill, Edward. *The Secret Life of Thomas Hardy: "Retaliatory Fiction."* Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003. Print.

Orel, Harold, ed. *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences*. London: Macmillan, 1990. Print.

Perry, C. R. *The Victorian Post Office: The Growth of a Bureaucracy*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 1992. Print.

Plietzsch, Birgit. *The Novels of Thomas Hardy as a Product of Nineteenth-Century Social, Economic and Cultural Change*. Berlin: Tenea, 1994. Print.

Porter, Charles A. "Foreword." *Yale French Studies* 71. Men/Women of Letters (1986): 1–14. Print.

Roud, Steve. *The Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Thomas, Kate. *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.

Toliver, Harold E. "The Dance Under the Greenwood Tree: Hardy's Bucolics." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 17.1 (1962): 57–68. Print.

Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Community and Association*. Trans. Charles P. Loomis. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955. Print.

Vincent, David. *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. Print.

Widdowson, Peter. *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.

Williams, Merryn, and Raymond Williams. "Hardy and Social Class." *Thomas Hardy: The Writer and His Background*. Ed. Norman Page. London: Bell & Hyman, 1980. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution*. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2001. Print.

Notes

¹ Golden's study *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (2009) offers an extremely detailed and thorough account of the social and cultural impact of Hill's postal reforms. It is an important supplement to institutional histories of the Post Office by M.J. Daunt, C.R. Perry, and, most recently, Duncan Campbell-Smith, as it explores how the penny post altered the daily lives of the Victorians. The book also carefully examines pre-reform rhetoric.

² The first written record for this belief dates to 1707, a few decades after the postal service was first opened to the public. It seems that the superstition became increasingly obscure throughout the nineteenth century, though it remained in existence, at least in the most isolated and remote communities, until the early twentieth (see Roud 59)

³ In fact, the “letter in the candle” was not the only superstition concerning letters. The number of crows in the sky, or the turned-up hem of a skirt could equally function as signs for the imminent arrival of a letter (see Roud 102, 125).

⁴ For representative works that discuss the idea of community in relation to *Jude the Obscure*, see Howe, Burstein, Brown, Farrell, Pyle, Mallett, and Plietzsch.

